

## MEMORIAL

### T. STERLING CLAIBORNE

BY NICHOLAS E. DAVIES, M.D.

Thomas Sterling Claiborne, whose medical career spanned 45 years in Atlanta, died on December 27, 1987 after a protracted illness. He was one of the last classical “diagnosticians” trained in the 1920’s and 1930’s.

Thomas Sterling Claiborne was born on January 10, 1908 in St. Francisville, Louisiana, the third of five children, to the Reverend Randolph R. Claiborne, Sr., an Episcopal priest, and Mary Clark Claiborne. The family moved to Marietta, Georgia where he attended public schools before following his older brother, Randolph, later Bishop of Atlanta, to the University of Virginia. There he was a Phi Beta Kappa and graduated with honors. He then attended the University’s School of Medicine where he was a member of AOA, again graduating with honors. In 1932, he became a “house pup” at the Massachusetts General Hospital and in 1934, he became a Fellow at the Lahey Clinic, both in Boston. He returned to Atlanta in 1936, establishing a practice in internal medicine, which he did continuously, except for the War years, until his retirement in 1980. He was certified by the American Board of Internal Medicine in 1936, and was later certified in cardiovascular diseases.

As America entered WWII, Dr. Claiborne enlisted in the “Emory Unit” of the Army’s 43rd General Hospital, serving as the Chief of Cardiology in the North African campaign and later in Southern France. He kept an extensive journal of his experiences in the Army, which was published by his family a year before his death.

After the war he returned to Atlanta and resumed the practice of internal medicine and cardiology. It was during this time that he established his reputation of being one of the finest clinicians in the Southeastern United States. Well trained, highly intelligent, thorough, persistent, tenacious, he practiced classical internal medicine: first do no harm; establish a diagnosis; it is better to undertreat than to overtreat; re-evaluate thoroughly when things are not going well; be realistic but offer hope; it is essential to be honest to one’s self and to one’s patients; compassion is mandatory but in something so important as health, the brain must rule the heart. He was straight talking almost to a fault. For people with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease who still smoked, he would say, “I can take care of you only if you stop smoking.” As Osler said of Samuel Wilks, “He was a frank, outspoken man, whose yea was yea and nay, nay, to students and patients alike.” His strong personality and patrician good looks invited emulation by the many students and

residents whom he taught at Grady Memorial Hospital, the large teaching hospital associated with Emory University School of Medicine.

Dr. Claiborne was a Clinical Professor of Medicine at Emory University School of Medicine from 1953 until his death. He was one of the founders of the Georgia Heart Association in 1949 and was its second president. He was co-director of the Giddings Memorial Heart Clinic at St. Joseph's Infirmary for many years. He was an original member of the Southeastern Clinical Club, a Fellow of the American College of Physicians of which he was Governor for Georgia for 9 years. He was a member of the American Clinical and Climatological Association and the Constantini-ans.

Dr. Claiborne's life centered around his family and his church. He was a Vestryman and Senior Warden of the Cathedral of St. Philip. He was also a trustee of Canterbury Court, an Episcopal retirement home in Atlanta.

In 1937, he married the former Dorothy Rohrer of Atlanta, who survives him. They had three children, of whom he was very proud. The eldest, Mary Ann, a specialist in teaching methodologies, now works in the Dean's office of the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine. Her husband, Richard B. Johnston, Jr., M.D., is Chairman of the Department of Pediatrics at the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine. They have three children. The second child, Dorothy Meade, with her husband, retired Air Force Brigadier General Charles M. Duke, Jr., is involved in outreach programs for Christian ministries in this country and around the world. In 1972, General Duke, a former astronaut, walked on the moon during the Apollo 16 flight. They have two sons. The third child, Thomas S. Claiborne, Jr., M.D. is a gastroenterologist practicing in Atlanta. His wife, Ruth Farmer Claiborne, is an attorney specializing in legal issues involving children. They have two children.